IMPACT OF SENSORY LOSSES ON ATTACHMENT, COMMUNICATION, AND CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT

What does it feel like to have limited, or no, vision and hearing? What does this mean in terms of how one learns to communicate?

Blindness:

If a child is born totally blind, how will that limitation affect his connection with those around him?

The literature estimates that 75% of most people's learning comes through vision. This sounds very dramatic and may seem overstated, but this statistic rightfully highlights the great importance of a child's visual connection with the environment-with objects, people, actions, and relationships.

Bonding:

Studies have found that most parents of babies who are blind needed to be taught not to look for responsiveness and initiative in their children's faces, but to look instead at their body language, especially at their hands. This is not natural for us because we are so conditioned both to look at another's face for responsiveness and to express ourselves through our own faces. In fact, for a sighted infant, the eyes are a main way of initiating social exchange. A baby, through their eyes, expresses attention, longing, doubt, boredom, questioning. Parents of blind babies were taught to look at their children's hands rather than their faces for these signs of attention. They saw; excitement, exploration, and anticipation, and they were richly rewarded by discovering the babies were, in fact, expressing a wide range of feelings and interests, and emotions that were not evident on the children's faces. Once the parents could see this, a more satisfying dialogue could resume between infant and parents. Even grief could be managed when the baby brought his own rewards in response, in diversity of social exchange, and in becoming an active partner in the love relationship.

Establishing Object Performance:

For an infant who is blind and who is only a few months old, an object does not exist if they are not touching it. Even toys in the baby's crib might as well not exist if they don't accidentally put their hand on them or roll over onto them. The sighted infant learns about the existence of objects apart from others by learning to synthesize information from their eyes, their hands, and their mouth. The play that sighted babies do in front of their faces, at first accidentally, and later intentionally, with their mouths, their hands, their fingers, and with toys, teaches them that what they see has substantiality. Through repeated experimentation, practiced for hours at a time, they learn that certain movements create certain visual results, and that certain visual stimuli have certain physical feelings

associated with them. Gradually, through trial and error, they are able to reach for and grasp something they see with their eyes. They have come to trust the information from their eyes that tell them the object they are not yet touching, has substantiality, and, if reached for, will reward their open hands with texture and weight. They have come to believe this information, so surely, that they trust that even if the object is covered with a cloth, or dropped on the floor out of sight, will still exist. This is what we call object permanence.

Children who are blind have a harder time than sighted children do in establishing object permanence. That is, they could not as easily hold the image of an object in their minds when the object was not physically present. The ability to do so is intimately related to the ability to name and categorize objects, and thus is clearly tied to language and conceptual development.

Blind children deprived of the visual connection with objects to one degree of another, must learn other, less direct ways of communicating with the object, world, or learning about it, trusting its very existence apart from their physical connection with it. For a child who is blind and can hear, the ear and sound begin to substitute for the eye and sight. Clapping games, toys that make noise, their hand on father's speaking mouth, the accidental and later intentional brush against a hanging bell, are the experiences that teach "ear-hand coordination" and the beginning of a sense of object permanence. Given enough auditory stimulus in place of visual stimulus, the child who is blind will come to trust that mother's voice means mother is near, that a bell sound indicates the existence of a round metal object, that a lullaby sound tells that a favorite wind-up teddy bear is near, even if the hands are not able at once to contact with these things.

Now, you have begun to get a sense of the monumental task ahead with an infant who is both profoundly deaf and totally blind. Right here, at this most basic juncture of development whom the baby must come to know that objects exist apart from themselves, the baby who is Deaf-Blind has a very hard task that will require much help and patience. Likewise, their family will need a great deal of information and support to build these early relationships.

Children who are blind and do not receive help in establishing object permanence will lag behind in language development, the ability to name objects depends upon some sense of their existence apart from oneself. With help, this naming facility will happen in due course, not far behind a normally sighted child's ability.

Mobility:

Another lag will happen too, if the child who is blind is not helped to achieve object permanence. This child may be slow to develop mobility and may therefore have additional cognitive and communicative delays. Moving around in the world and exploring are ways in which a child comes to know about their world, develops curiosity, and learn about the ways in which people and objects are related to one another. Mobility develops in large part, in a sighted infant, as a result of vision. Visual objects

are “lures” for the child; they draw them out into the world. They learn to crawl by attempting to reach something they can see but cannot yet touch. They learn to walk as their visual world draws them upward. As they learn these skill, they become more of a conventionalist, asking questions, protesting, and requesting things. Their communication skills develop as they move about in the world more and more.

The child with sight and hearing is motivated to crawl toward the brightly colored toy across the room or toward Grandma’s outstretched arms and encouraging words. Without visual lures, or the sound lures that emerge with object permanence, a child who is blind will not be motivated to move forward. In many instances, it is not mobility training per se that helped children who are blind to learn to crawl and walk, but it was “educational work in the area of human attachment. An educational program that provides training for the parents in bonding with their children and in helping their children learn about reaching “can confidently wait for the baby to invent mobility for themselves. Then, cognitive and communication gains will follow naturally as the child begins to explore their world.

Developing Abstract Concepts:

Finally, we must mention the effect that limited or absent vision is likely to have upon conceptual development and, as a result, upon communication. A child who is blind gains knowledge of the world through their reaming senses: hearing, touch, taste, smell, and kinesthetic experience. Some objects and ideas are particularly difficult to experience through these senses alone. How would one explain what a cloud is to a child who is blind? What about a sunset, a rainbow, stars? The absence of the experience of such things is only really a deficiency when viewed from the unreflective point of view of those of us who are sighted. If we are sighed people communicating with persons who are blind, we must be careful not to assume that their experiences match ours in all areas; we must remember, as we speak to put ourselves in their shoes. We must not assume that lack of knowledge of some things, we take for granted, means that they are unintelligent or that communication is therefore impossible. It may actually be a richer communication if we each take the time to make sure we understand one another.

The person who is sighted, from the point of view of the person who is blind, may actually be “deficient” in other senses. Sight usually provides a great percentage of the information that we receive about the world. Without that focus, or dependence on vision for connection, the other senses may become more highly sharpened.